

TRIBAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA – CAUSES AND IMPACT

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Abstract

Tribal movements in India represent the struggles of indigenous communities to protect their land, culture, identity, and socio-economic rights. These movements emerged as a response to colonial exploitation, forest laws, displacement, and socio-political marginalization. From the beginning, tribal people had lived in rural India in varying economic conditions and relative seclusion. They kept their distinct identity despite their interactions with non-tribal people. Each tribal community continued to have its own political and economic structures, as well as its own socio-religious and cultural life. Land and forests were the tribal peoples' primary sources of production and subsistence. They were unknown to the landlordism.

Introduction

Tribal Movements of 18th and 19th-century happened in phases were the result of exploitative British Policies. Santhal, Kol, Rampa etc. are some of the Tribal Movements in India.

Tribal movements in India during British rule were marked by their frequent, militant, and violent nature. These movements can be divided into mainland and frontier tribal revolts. Mainland rebellions were driven by issues such as loss of land, forests, and the traditional system of joint ownership, along with exploitation by outsiders. In contrast, northeastern frontier tribes, seeking political autonomy or independence, led longer-lasting and distinct revolts.

Initially focused on socio-religious oppression, many of these tribal movements eventually merged with the broader National Movement. Tribal leaders and chiefs often employed traditional weapons to resist colonial forces and assert their rights.

Tribal Uprisings

The tribal groups held significant and inseparable roles within Indian society. Before their annexation and subsequent incorporation into the British territories, they had their own social and economic systems. The British implemented new rules were implemented by the British and the boundary between the tribals and the state was broken. This led to many clashes between the Government and the tribal people. These struggles can be named as tribal movements/uprisings.

Causes for the Tribal Movements

By annexing their territories and clearing the forest to introduce cash crops in India, the British administration brought relatively isolated tribal groups into the ambit of colonialism. The factors for the tribal uprisings can be considered as follows:

Land Alienation: The tribal communities faced land dispossession and encroachments by colonial powers and landlords, leading to the loss of their traditional territories and livelihoods. The British declared that forests were state property.

Exploitative Revenue System: The British introduced a new land revenue system and taxation of tribal products, resulting in the loss of the traditional rights of tribals over land.

Forest Policies: Forest Department (1864), Forests Act (1865), and Indian Forests Act (1878) restricted tribal access to forests and natural resources, further affecting their traditional hunting, gathering, and agricultural practices.

The introduction of intermediaries: British introduced traders and moneylenders into the forests, and oppression and extortion by police officers & petty officials aggravated distress among tribals.

Cultural Suppression: Christian missionaries and their activities among tribal groups were seen as threatening their culture and beliefs.

Classification of Tribal Movements

Tribal movements in India before independence can be classified into three distinct phases, each responding to colonialism and its impact on tribal communities, economy, and rights.

First Phase (1795-1860): Led by traditional tribal leaders as British rule began to undermine their privileges.

Second Phase (1860-1920): Intensified colonial policies and mercantilism disrupted tribal economies, with leadership from the lower tribal ranks.

Third Phase (1920-1947): Tribals participated in nationalist, agrarian, and separatist movements, with leadership from educated tribes or external leaders.

Mainland and Frontier Tribal Revolts

Tribal revolts in India during British rule are categorized into mainland and frontier revolts. Mainland revolts occurred in regions like Chotanagpur, Odisha, and Central India, driven by economic exploitation, land alienation, and outsider intrusion. British policies worsened these issues, leading to unrest.

Frontier revolts, concentrated in northeastern India (Assam, Nagaland, Manipur), focused on political autonomy or independence, seeking to preserve traditional governance and protect lands from colonial control.

Features of Tribal Revolts

Tribal revolts in India shared several defining characteristics that set them apart from other forms of resistance. Key features of tribal revolts include:

Social and Economic Grievances: Tribals resisted economic exploitation, land alienation, and oppressive taxation imposed by British policies.

Traditional Leadership: Charismatic tribal chiefs played central roles in organizing and leading uprisings.

Resistance to British Policies: Rejection of British land revenue, forest laws, and cultural imposition sparked revolts.

Guerrilla Warfare: Tribals used guerrilla tactics, leveraging local terrain for surprise attacks.

Cultural and Religious Resistance: Uprisings often aimed to preserve tribal customs and resist foreign influences.

Major Tribal Revolts

Tribal revolts in India played a crucial role in resisting colonial rule, with various uprisings fueled by oppression, land dispossession, and exploitation. The following is a summary of key tribal revolts and movements:

Tribal Revolts	Characteristics
Pahariya Rebellion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leader: Raja Jagganath in 1778 - Reasons: Against the British extension of settled agriculture into the Pahariya territories -British response: In the 1770s, the British brutally hunted and killed Paharias. By the 1780s, the British had adopted a pacification policy. Chiefs received an allowance and were held responsible for men's conduct. - Developments: Paharia chiefs rejected allowances. Accepting allowances would have led to the loss of authority. They retreated to the mountains, waging war against outsiders.
Chuar Uprising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Location: The region between Chota Nagpur and the plains of Bengal. (1767-1802) - Leader: Durjan Singh - Reasons: By 1798, the tribals rebelled, took to arms, and adopted the guerrilla tactics of war when they realised that the British had taken away their land. - Nature

	<p>The tribes rebelled, took to arms, and adopted the guerrilla tactics of war when they realised that the British had taken away their land.</p>
Tamar Revolts	<p>- Location:</p> <p>By Oraon tribes of Tamar in the Chotanagpur region(1789-1832)</p> <p>- Leader: Bhola Nath Sahay</p> <p>- Reasons</p> <p>They revolted against the faulty alignment system of the British government. The alignment system exposed the British failure to secure tenants' land rights, causing unrest among Tamar tribes in 1789.</p> <p>- Developments:</p> <p>They were joined in the revolt by the tribals of adjoining areas - Midnapur, Koelpur, Dhadha, Chatshila, Jalda and Silli. The Government suppressed the movement in 1832-33</p>
Bhil Uprising	<p>- Location: Khandesh hill ranges (Maharashtra & Gujarat) (1817-19)</p> <p>- Reasons:</p> <p>Khandesh was occupied by the British in 1818. Bhils saw them as outsiders, and the uprising began. Freedom-loving tribes challenged British rule and lost forest and land rights. The Bhils again revolted in 1825, 1836 and 1846.</p>
Ramosi uprising	<p>- Location:</p> <p>Ramosis, an aboriginal community in the Western Ghats (Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh), once served in the lower ranks of the Maratha army.</p> <p>- Leader</p> <p>In 1822, Chittur Singh of Satara led a Ramosi uprising, plundering Satara. In 1826, Ramosis around Poona revolted under Umaji Naik and Bapu Trimbakji Sawant.</p> <p>- Causes: Uprisings resulted from the annexation and deposition of popular rulers. After the Peshwa's defeat in 1818, Ramosis lost their livelihood.</p> <p>- British Response: The British condoned Ramosi crimes, granting them land and recruiting them as hill police.</p>

<p>Ahom Revolt</p>	<p>- Location: Assam (1828-1833)</p> <p>- Leader:</p> <p>Gomadhar Konwar, an Ahom Prince, had started a rebellion along with the support of Dhanjay Borgohain and Jairam Khargharia Phukan</p> <p>- Reasons:</p> <p>British occupation despite Treaty of Yandaboo 1826. The British pledge to leave after the Anglo-Burmese War raised the Ahom nobility's suspicions and dissatisfaction.</p>
<p>Kol Uprising</p>	<p>- Location:</p> <p>Chotanagpur region (1831-32)</p> <p>It spread to Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Palamau and Manbhum</p> <p>- Reasons</p> <p>British penetration and law over Kol Chiefs caused tribal tensions. Occupation brought settlers, transferring tribal lands. Merchants, money lenders, and British law threatened chiefs' power. Resentment led to uprisings against outsiders.</p>
<p>Khasi Uprising</p>	<p>- Location: A region between the Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills (1829-33)</p> <p>- Leader: U. Tirot Singh</p> <p>- Reasons:</p> <p>The British annexed the independent tribal states of Khasi Hills in 1826. The British administration wanted to build a road linking the Brahmaputra Valley with Sylhet. The conscriptions of labourers for road construction led Khasis to wage a war of Independence (1829-33)</p>
<p>Santhal Rebellion</p>	<p>- Location: Birbhum, Bankura, Singhbhum, Hazaribagh, Bhagalpur and Monghyr (1855-57)</p> <p>- Leader:</p> <p>Sidhu and Kanhu, under them around 10,000 santhals rose against these dreadful activities in June 1855; pledged to establish a free Santhal state. Santhal Revolt (1855-56) led to Santhal Pargana's creation, carving 5,500 sq. miles from Bhagalpur and Birbhum districts.</p> <p>- Reasons:</p>

	<p>Santhals rebelled against colonial exploitation, and money-lenders due to Permanent Settlement. The British brought zamindars, traders, and moneylenders, imposing heavy taxes, high-interest rates. Santhals revolted for self-rule.</p> <p>- Nature:</p> <p>Mass-scale violence- account books of moneylenders and government buildings were burnt, and their exploiters punished</p>
<p>Khond Uprising</p>	<p>- Location: Orissa from 1837 to 1856</p> <p>- Leadership: Chakra Bisoi</p> <p>- Reasons:</p> <p>The Khonds faced issues with colonial administration stopping 'mariah' sacrifices. Other reasons: new taxes, the influx of zamindars, and money lenders.</p> <p>- Development:</p> <p>The uprising was later joined by Savaras and a few other militia clans led by Radhakrishna Dandasena After Bisoi disappeared in 1855 and Dandasena's hanging in 1857, the movement fizzled out.</p>
<p>Koli Uprising</p>	<p>- Location:</p> <p>Ahmednagar of Maharashtra (1822-29) The tribes in the Taranga hills of Mehsana district in Gujarat (1857)</p> <p>- Leadership</p> <p>From 1822-1829, Ramji Bhangre led a revolt against the British Raj and the local Baniya moneylenders. The uprising in the Taranga hills was led by Maganlal Bhukhan, Dwarakadas, and Jetha Madhavji</p> <p>- Reasons</p> <p>1822-29: In 1818, the British took over Pune from Peshwas. Ramji became Jamadar in Nayakwari police. Disputes over levies and salary led him to resign and start a revolt in February 1829. 1857: Kolis, affected by colonial rule, feared new legislation and colonisation's impact on customs.</p> <p>- Developments:</p>

	<p>1822-29: Ramji led 500-600 rebels, including Kolis like Govind Rao Kheri, who lost jobs under British rule. They attacked moneylenders in Akola Hills and destroyed their account books.</p> <p>1857: Kolis rebelled in September, plundering Company territories for two months. Lack of expected support led many to withdraw, and the British easily defeated the rest</p>
Birsa Munda Revolt	<p>- Location: Chotanagpur region (1890s)</p> <p>- Leadership:</p> <p>Birsa Munda, organised and led the tribal movement, giving the tribals a call for “Ulgulan” (Revolt) to the tribals. He urged the Mundas to give up drinking liquor, clean their village, and stop believing in witchcraft and sorcery. He called himself Dharti Aba, father of the world.</p> <p>- Reasons:</p> <p>The land policies of the British were destroying their traditional land system (Khuntkatti system or joint tenures), and missionaries were criticising their traditional culture Outsiders and money lenders took over the properties of the Mundas and forced them into wageless labourers.</p> <p>- Significance:</p> <p>Authorities prepared land records to safeguard tribal interests, leading to the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act 1908, preventing an easy land takeover by ‘Dikkus’. The movement showcased tribal people's ability to protest injustice and express anger against colonial rule. Movement faded after Birsa's death. Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas: The birth anniversary of Bhagwan Birsa Munda (15 November)</p>
Koya Rebellion	<p>- Location:</p> <p>Took place during 1879-80 in the eastern Godavari tract of Andhra Pradesh and some regions of Malkangiri region in Odisha.</p> <p>- Leadership:</p> <p>It was led by Tomma Dora, the Koya leader In 1880, Tomma Dora captured a police station, defeating a colonel and his contingent. Koyas hailed him as the 'King' of Malkangiri.</p> <p>- Reasons:</p>

	<p>Erosion of customary rights over forests, Mansabdars effort to enhance taxes on timber and grazing, Police exactions & exploitations by money lenders New excise regulation restricting domestic production of toddy</p>
<p>Tana Bhagat movement</p>	<p>- Location:</p> <p>Tana Bhagat movement (1914-1920) is a movement that emerged among the Oraon tribes of Chotanagpur, Jharkhand.</p> <p>- Leadership:</p> <p>The leader of the Tana Bhagat movement was called Jatra Bhagat</p> <p>- Reasons:</p> <p>The economic and cultural exploitation of the Oraon tribes. For them, Swaraj meant freedom from British rule and freedom from the oppression of the ‘Dikkus’, money-lenders, zamindars and feudal overlords.</p> <p>Also, the leaders of this movement wanted to stop the evil practices among the tribes, like the worship of ghosts and spirits and the practice of exorcism.</p> <p>- Nature:</p> <p>There was an active rebellion against unfair landlords who exploited them.</p> <p>Some of the members refused to pay rent to their landlords and ceased to cultivate their lands.</p> <p>- Significance:</p> <p>The movement was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and his idea of non-violence.</p>
<p>Rampa rebellion</p>	<p>- Location: Koyas of the Godavari Agency area (1922-1924), also known as the Manyam Rebellion.</p> <p>-Leadership: Led by Alluri Sitarama Raju, who, though not tribal, understood British restrictions on tribal life and organized the Adivasis.</p> <p>- Reasons: Forced labor, embargoes on forest produce, and restrictions on tribal agriculture led to widespread distress.</p> <p>- Developments: In 1922, Raju and 500 tribals attacked police stations, stealing rifles and ammunition, gaining attention for their guerrilla tactics.</p> <p>- British Response: British forces struggled to contain the uprising, capturing and executing Raju in 1924, leading to violent repression and the arrest of many activists.</p>

<p>Chenchu Tribal Movement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Location: Nallamalai forests of Andhra Pradesh. - Leader: Venkattappaya and even Gandhiji provided the links for the movement. - Development: They launched forest satyagraha during the non-cooperation movement (1920s). Congress wanted a limited social boycott of forest officials, but peasants sent cattle into the forest without fees. In Palnad, people proclaimed swaraj and attacked the police.
<p>Rani Gaidinliu’s Naga Movement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Location: Zeliangrong territory, Manipur (1930s) - Leadership: Initially led by Haipou Jadonang, Gaidinliu, his cousin, became the leader after his execution. Born in 1915 in Luangkao, Gaidinliu joined the Heraka movement at 13. In 1937, Jawaharlal Nehru visited her and honored her with the title “Rani.” - Reasons: The movement advocated for Naga self-rule and opposed British missionaries' efforts to convert the Naga tribes to Christianity. - Developments: Gaidinliu, influenced by Gandhian ideals, led a rebellion, refusing to pay taxes and resisting British authorities. - British Response: While the movement had religious reform goals, its anti-colonial stance made the British wary, leading to repressive actions. Gaidinliu was released only after India's independence in 1947.

Key Takeaways:

1. Land Alienation: Tribal communities have faced significant challenges related to land alienation, leading to loss of livelihoods and cultural heritage.
2. Displacement: Displacement of tribal communities due to development projects has led to significant social and economic disruption.
3. Empowerment: Tribal movements have led to increased empowerment and recognition of tribal rights, particularly through the Forest Rights Act, 2006.

Impact:

1. Policy Changes: Tribal movements have led to changes in government policies and laws, recognizing tribal rights and promoting sustainable development.
2. Social Change: Tribal movements have contributed to social change, promoting awareness and recognition of tribal issues and rights.
3. Continuing Challenges: Despite progress, significant challenges persist, including ongoing displacement, land alienation, and human rights violations.



Conclusion

Tribal movements in India are complex and multifaceted, driven by various causes and having significant impacts on the country's social, economic, and political landscape. Tribal movements in India are primarily driven by issues related to land alienation, displacement, and lack of access to resources. The impact of these movements has been significant, leading to changes in government policies and laws, such as the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013.

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